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ABSTRACT

Noting the lack of research into the effects of maternal employment on the cognitions of a young adult sample, this study examined the relationship between maternal employment and college students' beliefs about the consequences of maternal employment and their own plans for future workplace involvement. Participating in the study were 635 undergraduate college students. Subjects completed a packet of questionnaires, including the Beliefs about the Consequences of Maternal Employment for Children (BACMEC) Scale, and the Childhood Appraisal Scale designed to measure their perception of the consequences of their mother's work status; subjects also reported their mother's employment at each stage of their own development. Subjects were divided into two groups (early unemployed versus early employed) on the basis of maternal work status during their early childhood. Findings indicated that when males and females were assessed jointly, early maternal employment was significantly associated with perceptions of both the benefits and costs associated with maternal employment during their early childhood. Those whose mothers worked perceived greater benefits and fewer costs than those whose mothers had not worked during their early childhood. Males perceived fewer benefits and greater costs than females of maternal employment. (Contains 17 references.) (KB)

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GENDER DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDES TOWARD MATERNAL EMPLOYMENT DURING EARLY CHILDHOOD AND THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL YEARS

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Ursinus College

2002

Abstract

This study assessed the attitudes of both male and female undergraduate college students' regarding maternal employment, in an effort to replicate earlier research showing a disparity between young men's and women's perceptions of the consequences of maternal employment. Perceptions of both the benefits and costs associated with maternal employment were assessed via administration of the BACMEC (Greenberger et al., 1988). Scores on the two BACMEC subscales were calculated for each subject. Between groups t-tests showed a significant effect on both the cost and benefit subscales; males perceived fewer benefits and greater costs than females. When males and females were assessed jointly, early maternal employment was significantly associated with perceptions of both the benefits and costs associated with maternal employment during their early childhood.

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Introduction

The needs of children at particular developmental stages are perceived differently across cultures. For example, while independence training begins fairly early in the U.S., Japanese youngsters are permitted to be extremely reliant upon their mothers even well into the elementary school years. Similarly, such attitudes have shifted considerably over time, within particular cultures. These perceptions of children's developmental capacities help to shape beliefs about optimal care arrangements, and attitudes toward such things as maternal employment.

Parents' beliefs about their children's needs, and whether they can adequately met in a nontraditional family with an employed mother, can have a dramatic influence on whether this type of family will function well for them. Mothers who feel that maternal employment exacts a huge toll on children will be burdened by guilt if they work outside the home when their children are young. Fathers with such attitudes may be critical of wives who are employed, and may undermine their confidence as mothers. Mothers who see children as very resilient and capable of thriving with an employed mother may resent husbands who expect them to surrender their workplace connections after the birth of children. Couples characterized by congruent attitudes toward maternal employment can facilitate the functioning of both traditional, sole-breadwinner and nontraditional, two-paycheck families. Young children are presumably more likely to prosper within families in which parents agree about the children's needs, and about how the family's economic responsibilities should be shared. For this reason, it is important to explore the extent to which men and women share similar attitudes about the needs of young children, and the degree to which their feelings about the impact of maternalemployment are congruent.

Traditional gender roles typically divide career and household responsibilities unevenly between partners (Xaio, 2000). Until recently, men were expected to be the primary source of income for the family and women were expected to manage all things domestic. This concept of separate distinct roles is no longer the norm for most families today. Furthermore, gender and family roles are still evolving from the traditional gender roles of yesterday. Only in the last ten years have we begun to see the children of non-traditional families make their choices as they reach young adulthood. Interestingly, the choices made by this generation are varied within gender, age, background and social class.

In an effort to understand how they fit into today's changing world, partners often stop to evaluate the fairness of their choices. Egalitarian women more often compared their contributions to their partner rather than the women that came before them (Buunk et al, 2000). Women were most satisfied in their relationships when the amount of hours spent performing domestic duties by their partner turned out to be what was agreed. Interestingly, men were most satisfied when their wives did less housework and set aside increased time for activities pertaining to the relationship (Stevens, Kiger & Riley, 2001). Ironically, marriage itself tends to promote dependence and hinder the success egalitarian practices. Moreover, this pattern (of promoting marital dependence) is most negative to the outcome of success for women as well as and marital satisfaction (Baxter & Kane, 1995).

Further complicating attitudes towards working women are the often hidden problems associated with childcare. The debate over quality childcare continues to be defended vigorously from both sides. The majority of studies surrounding childcare are often misleading as well as being inconclusive. Many of the studies that are able to publish 'statistically significant' positive results are never shared with the public because often the results are insignificant in real-world terms. However, 'statistically significant' negative results are quickly portrayed by the media as unexpected and unbelievable. Such sensational news surely shapes the attitudes of listeners causing many to no longer know what to believe, and what not to believe. In the end, childcare must continue to be a focus of all family studies due to the major importance of non-parental care. Understanding why partners make the career or family sacrifices they do will continue to challenge researchers in our constantly changing society.

Although there continues to be divisions within household labor and gaps in wages between men and women, it is obvious that for the most part the traditional roles no longer apply. Zuo (2000) found that attitudes tend to be shifting away from traditional gender ideologies. Most men in this sample were supportive of their wives employment, however, their gender ideologies remained more conventional than egalitarian. In the future we may find "policies that promote women's independence, encourage equal opportunity, pay equity, gender-neutral parental leave, and a more equal balance between home and work, will help foster more egalitarian attitudes for both men and women" (Baxter & Kane, 1995). Models of success that support pay equity for females have been seen in Scandinavian countries where reduced or unequal pay and gender discrimination have been decreased or eliminated through comprehensive family policies that recognize and value the differences between genders. Such policies govern parental leave options, childcare subsidies, flexible working hours, and compensation for work that benefits the community (which may not normally fall under the definition of paid work) such as community childcare (Baxter & Kane, 1995). Large-scale attitude and behavior change will require changes in how children are socialized. Perhaps if men and women both had access to flexible work hours and greater parental leave policies, the traditional gender roles would be less necessary and less supported (Baxter, 2000).

Recent Census Bureau statistics indicate that the double income family is now the average, even among families with young children (including those under one year of age). In fact, the rate of maternal employment for two-parent families with school age children is at least 71%, and this figure continues to rise each year (Hoffman, 1989). In light of this, much research has been done to investigate the effects of maternal employment on infants, children, and adolescents.

In making career decisions, many mothers continue to worry about the future consequences of their choice to return to the workplace when their children are still young. To date, there have been few empirical studies of adult children's perceptions of the impact of their mother's employment status. Although much is known about the short-term consequences of maternal employment (based on studies of young children), there are relatively few investigations using adolescent samples and even fewer using adult

subjects. In this current study we hope to review the available literature, and present research findings on college students' views of the effects of maternal work status on their lives and their career and family plans.

There has been considerable debate over whether maternal employment is beneficial or detrimental for children. Over the years many researchers have postulated global negative, cognitive, academic, emotional and self-esteem repercussions of maternal employment. To date, nearly four decades of work has failed to affirm the majority of pessimistic predictions about the children of employed women. Most studies have found very few differences between children grouped on the basis of maternal work status (Hoffman, 1989).

Many have suggested that much of the struggle found in the typical double income home will disappear when members of the next generation become parents because so many themselves were reared in this "nontraditional" family. According to this argument, it is the incongruity of having been a child in a "traditional" family (where the father is the sole employed adult) while living out one's adult life in a "nontraditional" family (where both parents are employed) that fuels the pandemic conflict, guilt, and anxiety that beset double income families of the '90s.

Having childhood experiences with an employed mother could certainly affect one's perceptions about the appropriateness of maternal employment and affect one's own lifestyle choices and adjustment. Perhaps having an employed mother will prepare future husbands with an outlook that will enable them to cope more effectively with the demands of being a father in a two-paycheck household.

The experience of being reared by an employed mother may have an even greater impact on daughters. Daughters of employed mothers have been shown to be more egalitarian in their sex role attitudes (Knoblach and Chambliss, 1989; Brogan and Kutner, 1976; Meier, 1972; Gardner and LeBreque, 1986). Daughters of employed women tend to be more careers oriented, more ambitious (Almquist and Angrist, 1971) and more often tend to go to college (Hoffman, 1974). In a summary of the literature Hoffman notes that the most egalitarian ideologies held by women of employed mothers, were those whose mothers held high status jobs (Hoffman, 1974).

In a study regarding children's perceptions of their parents, (Knaub, 1986), adolescent and young adult children of dual-career families were surveyed as to their satisfaction with this lifestyle, perceptions of family strength, and views on various issues related to the dual-career lifestyle. In general, children rated their families relatively high on perceptions of family strengths such as concern, respect, and support. The subjects mentioned having positive role models, financial security and the opportunity to develop independence as possible benefits from growing up in a dual-career family. The subjects also indicated that time constraints were the primary problems they had with both of their parents working. However, these children were highly supportive of their parents' double career lifestyle and they indicated that they thought the benefits of maternal employment outweighed the disadvantages.

A study of college student attitudes by Chambliss, Owens, and Carr (1991) provided no support for "working mother" guilt and anxiety. When compared with students from families with unemployed mothers, students from two-paycheck families did not report greater family discord. They also showed no greater tendency to blame their mothers for childhood or current problems (social, esteem, intellectual, or academic). Students reported admiring mothers who worked fulltime most, mothers who worked part-time next, and unemployed mothers least.

The only consistently perceived "casualties" of maternal employment were perceptions of the mother's happiness and quality of her marriage. Many students whose mothers were employed fulltime during the subjects' infancy or preschool years reported the belief that their mothers "would have been happier" and their marriages "would have been better" had their mothers' work status been different. However, it is important to note that even here, the majority of students with fulltime employed mothers did not perceive maternal work status as having compromised either mothers' happiness or marriage quality.

The present study was performed in order to gain a better understanding of the relationship between maternal employment and college students' beliefs about the consequences of maternal employment and their own plans for future workplace involvement. While many previous studies have investigated the effects of maternal employment, this is one of the first to assess the impact on the cognitions of a young adult sample.

Method

Subjects:

The subjects used in this study were 635 college students. The sample consisted of 230 men and 405 women who were enrolled in an introductory psychology course at Ursinus College in Pennsylvania. The subjects ranged in age from 18 to 28 years old.

Procedure:

The packet used in this study was handed out to subjects in the introductory psychology class in which they were enrolled. Subjects were asked to fill out the packet in its entirety with ample time given to fill out the questionnaire in full.

In part one, subjects were asked to provide demographic information and to answer questions concerning their career and family expectations. These questions required subjects to disclose information concerning their expectations about family plans, job type, job characteristics, and work preference based on the age of their youngest child. Subjects were also asked 10 questions concerning their attitudes toward

their mother and father. These questions required subjects to indicate their degree of agreement with each statement on a 4 point Likert scale.

Part two of the packet was made up of the BACMEC questionnaire (Greenberger et al., 1988). The BACMEC is a 24-item scale developed to measure Beliefs About the Consequences of Maternal Employment for Children. The BACMEC included beliefs about both benefits (13 items) and costs (11 items). Studies of five samples (n=375) have demonstrated that the total BACMEC scale along with subscales are highly reliable and have good convergent, divergent, and concurrent validity (Greenberger et al. 1988).

In part three of the packet, subjects were asked to disclose information about their mother's work status at each stage of development. The stages of development were infancy (birth to 1 1/2 years old), preschool (2 to 5 years old), childhood (6 to 12 years old), and adolescence (13 to 18 years old). The subjects were asked to report whether their mothers were employed part-time, fulltime, or not employed outside the home during each stage of development. Subjects also disclosed information about their mother's position indicating whether it was professional, white collar, or blue- collar work. Subjects were also asked to indicate whether or not they had been raised in a single parent household.

Part four of the packet consisted of the CAS, the Childhood Appraisal Scale (Chambliss, Owens, & Carr 1991). The CAS is an 18-item questionnaire designed to measure the subject's perception of the consequences of their mother's work status. The subjects were asked to rate each item on a scale from 1 to 4 depending on how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each statement. The statements permitted subjects to indicate if they felt their lives would have been different if their mother's work status had been different when they were growing up. This allowed an assessment of the perceived impact of fulltime and part-time maternal employment, as well as unemployment.

Results

Subjects were divided into two groups (early unemployed versus early employed) on the basis of maternal work status during their early childhood (birth to 5 years old). Subjects were similarly grouped on the basis of maternal employment (late unemployment versus late employment) during their later childhood (6 through 18 years old). Maternal employment included both fulltime and part-time employment. Subjects from single parent households were excluded from the analyses described below.

Scores on the two BACMEC subscales ("benefits" and "costs" of maternal employment) were calculated for each subject by adding the directionally adjusted item values. Between groups t-tests revealed a significant sex effect on both the benefits ($t=3.50$, $df=635$, $p<.05$) (see table 1) and costs ($t=3.23$, $df=635$, $p<.05$)(see table 2) subscales; males perceived fewer benefits and greater costs than females. When males and females were assessed jointly, early maternal employment was significantly associated with perceptions of both the benefits and costs associated with maternal employment; those whose mothers worked perceived greater benefits and fewer costs

than those whose own mothers had not worked during their early childhood. The results of his study affirmed those obtained previously by Gambone, Rowles, Szuchyt, Dietrick, Gelband, Lu, Zohe, Stickney, Fields, & Chambliss, 2002.

Table 1

Benefit subset score of the BACMEC:

	Mean	s.d.	n
Males:	50.58	10.84	226
Females:	50.58	11.13	400

Table 2

Cost subset score of BACMEC:

	Mean	S.D.	N
Males:	34.93	10.80	226
Females:	32.04	10.76	400

Discussion

Historically, females were expected to have children. While it is only starting to become socially acceptable to be a childless couple, many women are choosing to wait until later to have children in order to pursue a career, or are deciding not to have children at all.

Males and females have very different views on maternal employment. Specifically, college men feel that there are more costs and fewer benefits associated with maternal employment than do college women. These inconsistent views between men and women about maternal employment are further exemplified by the men's expectations of their spouse's employment as compared to the women's plans about their future employment. The gender differences in the Cost and Benefit category, which was calculated using the BACMEC method, may be attributed to the growing number of women who desire to have both a career and children simultaneously. These women may have approved more of their mothers' maternal employment, then a man who still feels that a woman should not work, and raise the children.

Initially, men and women tend to agree that mothers should stay home with their infants. Most of the men expect their wives to do this and many women report that they do not plan to work at that stage of their children's lives. However, for the rest of the child's life, there are differences between the percentage of men who expect their wives to work and the percentage of women who expect to be working. Many more men expect that their wives will be staying at home to raise children, while women believe that they will employed outside the home. It is important to note that both men and women find it more acceptable for mothers to be working at least part-time as their children get older. The older the children, the smaller the percentages of both men and women who prefer the mother to stay at home. Males and females tend to view the roles of their mothers quite differently. Women who had mothers who did not work outside the home may feel that their mothers were "held back" while raising the children and should have held a job as well. Men who had mothers who worked exclusively in the home may have viewed them negatively. The males may have wanted more freedom than what having a stay-at-home mother afforded them.

For both male and female college students, there are differences in attitudes towards maternal employment based on whether or not their own mothers were employed during their early childhood. When assessed together, men and women felt that there were fewer costs and more benefits if their mothers had been employed during early childhood. There were additional differences between subjects whose mothers worked and subjects whose mothers did not when males and females were looked at separately.

Men whose mothers worked outside the home during their early childhood were more likely to prefer that their wives work during their children's infancy. These men were more receptive to maternal employment than men whose mothers did not work outside the home. This may be due to the fact that they had a positive experience with maternal employment and positive personal outcomes. There is no difference between men whose mothers worked and those who did not in their preference for spousal employment during the preschool and elementary school years. However, there is a surprising shift in attitude during adolescence. Men with mothers who did not work during early childhood were more likely to prefer that their spouse work during adolescence than men whose mothers did work. Perhaps men whose mothers worked during early childhood continued to work for their entire childhood and could not be there for support during adolescence. These men may have had a difficult adolescence for this or other reasons and perhaps are blaming this difficulty on their mothers' employment. Despite this contradictory finding, more men from both groups prefer that their wives become employed, as the children get older.

There are also differences between women whose mothers worked during early childhood and those subjects whose mothers did not. Women whose mothers were employed during their early childhood were more likely to prefer to work during their children's preschool, elementary, and adolescent years. As was true for the men, the gaps between the two groups of women got smaller as children got older and more women from both groups preferred to work outside the home by the time their children were adolescents. An interesting finding was that there was not a difference between the two

groups of women about their preference to work during their children's infancy. Only a very small percentage of women from either group reported that would seek outside employment during their children's infancy. Although the women whose mothers worked during early childhood learned from this example and plan to work at some point during their own children's lives, women still hesitate to work during a child's infancy.

There were several common findings among all of the college students. Both men and women tend to believe that mothers should stay at home during children's infancy. Many people still believe that important bonding is achieved during this stage of life and that mothers best foster this attachment by staying at home with their young children. However, as children enter school, men and women feel more comfortable with maternal employment. This could be due to the fact that the children are no longer at home during the day so mothers who work are not missing out on time spent with their children. By the time children reach adolescence, most men and women feel it is appropriate for mothers to work outside the home. Again, this may be due to the fact that mothers do not miss time with adolescents by working. Adolescents spend a majority of time at school, in extracurricular activities, and with peers. Even if mothers were at home, many adolescents would not be comfortable spending time with them. Mothers who work also seem to set a good example for both sons and daughters, who later are more accepting of maternal employment.

Further study might warrant separating men and women further based on whether their mothers did not work, worked part-time, or worked full-time. There may be further differences between these groups. Those subjects whose mothers worked part-time may have had the best experience. Their mothers set a positive example with work, and the subjects would still have been able to spend a lot of time with them. Women who plan to work may only be planning to work part-time until their children reach a certain age.

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